

HAYES, MATTHEW S., M.F.A. Baptized by Fire
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My work is a personal narrative. I work primarily in the mediums of video and performance, the latter usually being in conjunction with the former. I often have difficulty defining which of these two terms is the most important to me. I have come to adopt “video performance,” a phrase that I first heard used by the artist Chris Burden.

During my time in graduate school, I have struggled with the importance of formal properties in my work and questioned how important formalism is to me. My thesis work shows that I have learned to employ craftsmanship when necessary and that I am also able to all but ignore formality and let a piece be driven by its content.

BAPTIZED BY FIRE

by

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PREFACE

I went through much deliberation in titling this paper and every title ended up containing the word “baptism.” The title I chose to go with is a reference to the quote by John The Baptist as recorded in *The Gospel of Matthew*. The quote goes as follows:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire. (*Matthew 3:11*)

I spent most of my youth as a churchgoer and I couldn’t tell you how many times I sat through a sermon that used the smelting of gold by a metallurgist as a metaphor of God putting his followers through trials of fire in order to refine their faith in Him. The Bible makes this comparison in the *First Epistle of Peter* and the scripture says:

So that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (*1 Peter 1:7*)

This metaphor can be easily applied to the process one must go through while working to receive an MFA degree in studio art. Studio visits, end of semester reviews and thesis meetings forced me to refine my work and distill it into something more pure that could stand up to tests and scrutiny.

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BAPTIZED BY FIRE

The three videos that comprise my thesis show work together as a triptych and are meant to complement one another. The centerpiece of the show is a projected video called *Baptism* and the two other videos titled *That's Me in the Corner* and *Home Movies I* serve as supplements to this piece.

That's Me in the Corner plays on a monitor mounted to the wall. It is a video performance in which I demonstrate the act of speaking in tongues and explain its relevance and biblical context in The New Testament and how it is used by the charismatic and Pentecostal Christian denominations. The video is subtitled in English, as the viewer will hear only the nonsensical and improvised sounds meant to mimic the intonation and rhythm of a spoken language. The audio, heard through a pair of headphones, is meant to create an intimate experience in which viewers feels that they are taking part in a one on one conversation in which they are interpreting the sounds coming from my mouth. This piece is to be viewed by one viewer at a time.

Across from *That's Me in the Corner* is a cathode ray tube television circa 1985. It is an artifact from my childhood. This is a fitting way to display the footage that plays on it which is excerpted from my personal home movies that were originally recorded on VHS by my father in the early 1990s. The piece is titled *Home Movies I*. In this video I revisit my first baptism experience and show how the story wove through the rest of my childhood and young adulthood. The audio is a juxtaposition of my voice narrating the

footage and the diegetic sound of a children's Christmas performance at my church and of my family around our home.

Baptism is a video performance in which I sit dressed in white in a bathtub and continuously pour a pitcher of water over my face, which is covered in a white cloth. The video is projected onto a 5 x 3.5 foot pedestal within which two speakers broadcast the echoing, diegetic sound of water running off my face back into the tub interspersed with the sound of me choking and gasping for air. In this video I symbolically cleanse myself of all the years I struggled with the burden that faith in a supreme being can bring. For the third and final time in my life I was baptized and I did so of my own accord. The repetitive act of pouring water over my face immediately conjures up images and descriptions of waterboarding. This is a reference to the obsessive and repetitive thoughts I had while I was a Christian. It is about the need to constantly be cleansed in the eyes of God. It was exhausting to always feel the need to repent and to wonder if my soul was truly saved. In this piece I am freeing myself from this mindset once and for all.

These three pieces work together to tell a story about my journey through religion. There are a few ways in which the viewer may see the relationship between these pieces.

Home Movies I and *Baptism* have an obvious dialogue in that they both deal with the subject of baptism, but they connect on a deeper level as well. *Baptism* and *That's Me in the Corner* have a dialogue in the sense that they are both video performances that isolate a particular Christian sacrament. The connection between *That's Me in the Corner* and *Home Movies I* other than that they both deal with religion the fact that I

address my audience directly. *Baptism*, by way of contrast, is a piece that treats the viewer as an observer.

While in graduate school I was trying to find universal themes in religion and struggling with making my work accessible to those less familiar with the Christian traditions that I reference and the meanings behind them. I have come to realize religion is a universal theme. Everyone, whether they have a religious faith or not, has been socialized in a world where there is a plethora of faiths and the majority of people on the planet are fully aware of Christianity and its sacraments and rituals. Furthermore, the majority of the work I have created in the last two years has been very personal and has oftentimes address to the viewer directly. This is a technique that can be seen in Chris Burden's piece *Big Wrench*. It is a video in which he tells a personal story about a truck that he once purchased named Big Job. The artist himself tells this story in first person and he directly addresses his audience. He tells this story with a very dry demeanor and this often gets a laugh when he mentions something that is a bit shocking or unexpected, such as him referring to one of his friends as "...a very successful, but low profile cocaine dealer." The story becomes metaphoric for the artists' sanity and the pressures of being an artist. Through his use of dry humor and storytelling, Burden is able to disarm the viewer and create a more intimate atmosphere.

Burden's work has definitely had an influence on me. I also feel a strong connection to some of the performances and videos by Nigel Rolfe. His piece *The Rope* was performed by Rolfe numerous times and occasionally recorded on video. In this performance he wraps a rope around his head and is forced to breathe through the large

amount of rope that is over his face. The rope is actually an artifact produced by a group of people who used to inhabit an island west of Ireland. The group would bind together all of the loose ends of twine that were left after a harvest and coat it in creosote in order to preserve it. I am fascinated by the way he uses his body to animate an artifact that was created in a traditional and almost ritualistic manner and that is exclusive to a dissolved, indigenous group of people. Rolfe is making work about culture and he is using the rope to connect himself to a group of people that he has no connection to otherwise. Using his body in this way creates tension for the viewer and Rolfe's actions begin to command reverence. I believe that this piece heavily influenced me in the weeks I was leading up to performing *Baptism*.

I went to film school as an undergraduate and I spent a lot of my time watching narrative and documentary films. As I finished up my undergraduate studies, I had begun making work that no longer fit into the genres of narrative and documentary. The next step was for me to adapt to the more conceptual concerns of the art world and to try to approach film from a new angle. An MFA studio art program seemed like the best environment for me. At first, I was nervous that my training as a filmmaker and lack of knowledge about art would hinder me from making resolved work, but in the end, I feel that my knowledge of film and the language of film as well as my technical skills as videographer and editor, have served me well in allowing me to find my own voice.

After my first attempts at making work that was predominantly content driven and gave little regard to formal properties, I began to see what I was capable of when I let go of my preconceived notion of what film and video should be. The works of artists like

Chris Burden, Nigel Rolfe and Marina Abramovic have been very inspiring to me. One of the most exhilarating feelings for me is when I discover an artist that deals with the same subject matter or treats a different subject matter in similar ways. It gives me license to do these things and it encourages me to continue making the art that I want to make.

As I write, it has been only a few weeks since I first received news of the passing of the beloved film critic Roger Ebert. While searching the Internet for interviews and stories about the artist Chris Burden, I came across one written by Ebert and it was interesting to look at the work of a video and performance artist through the eyes of a film critic. Here is a quote from a piece he wrote about Burden after viewing a few of his performance pieces: “The pieces were about himself. In a way, both of those pieces were saying, Me! Me! Me.” (Ebert) You may choose to disagree with Ebert’s statement about Chris Burden’s work, but after viewing a short film that featured the artist titled *A Video Portrait* and after reading Ebert’s first hand description of the performance pieces *Five Day Locker Piece* in which the artist stayed in a locker for 5 days, and a piece in which Burden lived for three weeks in a gallery on a shelf that hid him from the sight of the viewers, I believe that Ebert has an understanding of Burden and that he is accurate in saying that those pieces are as much about himself as they are about the viewer. This also helped me to realized that what is important to me about the work that I am making is the fact that it is also about myself. It is about my story and my journey through religion. Being forced to defend my work to my peers and faculty has encouraged me to

maintain awareness of where my work is coming from, but it took me some time to figure it out.

Having referenced Chris Burden numerous times in my thesis I would like to end with a quote from the artist himself. “[The MFA is] a breathing space for you to become an artist. So you're either going to become an artist and want to make art, or you're not...”
(Burden)

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